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10 Tips for Energy Efficiency

From simple home improvements to costlier upgrades, we'll guide you to savings during uncertain times for energy prices.

By Ron Taggart

Keep utility bills in check with energy-saving measures.

Taming Soaring Bills

Some of the simplest ways to save money during energy spikes include weather stripping and programmable thermostats. But you may also want to consider more expensive attic fans, high-efficiency windows, and reflective roofs.

Rising fuel costs ripple through the economy, and could spark inflation in the price of materials and labor. [Home equity loans](#) are an attractive way to finance costly home projects, and the ability to write off the interest paid on home equity loans and lines of credit may make these loans palatable for you and your family. Other benefits include possible tax credits and low-interest loans for energy-saving home projects; check with your state government to see if you qualify.



Improvements to boost energy efficiency offer other benefits. Insulating pipes reduces energy lost during hot-water delivery and prevents freeze-up damage in case your main heating system fails. And a high-efficiency natural-gas fireplace can become a valuable backup to oil or electric heating systems.

Money-Saving Tips

Invest in a programmable thermostat to save money.

[Installing a Programmable Thermostat](#)

1. Get With the Programmables

One of a homeowner's most cost-effective moves is to install a programmable thermostat (they typically retail for about \$85). Such thermostats can be set to increase and reduce temperature, depending on when you'll be home. If you can make simple electrical connections, you can do the installation yourself.



2. Weatherproof Windows

[Window Style Primer](#) [Home Improvement Encyclopedia/Windows and Doors](#)

Insulate windows with spring metal, vinyl, felt, or self-adhesive foam. If your windows have deteriorated beyond saving, consider replacements chosen for R-value (resistance to heat loss or gain). Avoid metal-frame windows, which conduct cold into a home.

3. Weatherproof Doors

[Weatherstripping Doors](#) [Home Improvement Encyclopedia/Windows and Doors](#)

Doors lose twice as much energy as windows because of their larger surface areas, frequent openings, and harder-to-seal thresholds. But, like windows, they can be inexpensively weather-stripped and sealed, and a wide variety of rubber or metal sweeps and threshold locks can be added on to seal those bottom-area gaps.

4. Maintain and Strengthen Garage Doors

[Strengthening Garage Doors](#) [Garage Door Dilemmas](#)

Garage doors present an even bigger problem than regular doors. Flimsy metal or warped wooden garage doors lose heat at an alarming rate and are one of a home's prime weak spots during violent wind storms. Heavier, better-insulated wood or fiberglass models require well-maintained quality components.

5. Insulate Exteriors

If your exterior walls lack interior insulation, check if you can drop in loose-fill insulation from the attic or have blown-in insulation professionally installed. Another big heat loser -- basement walls and crawl spaces -- can be framed out or insulated from inside or out to realize energy savings of up to 30 percent.

For added efficiency and safety, have the chimney swept yearly.

[How Much Insulation Do You Need?](#) [Choosing Insulation](#) [Plugging Hidden Air Leaks](#)

More Tips

6. Insulate Interiors

Once you understand different ratings and types of insulation, you can insulate around pipes, heating and ventilation ducts and [electrical outlets](#). Don't overlook the small openings where these fixtures pass through floors and walls -- the average home's gap space here loses as much energy as a two-foot square hole in an exterior wall.



7. Burners, Flues, Heaters, and Dishwashers

[Replacing Furnace Filters](#) [Repairing Chimneys](#)

Furnace filters should be changed every few months, while an annual chimney sweep will boost efficiency and reduce the risk of flue fires. Turning down the water-heater temperature settings to 140 degrees F for dishwasher-equipped homes (that's the minimum to kill germs) and 110 degrees in a home without a dishwasher can save energy and cut scalding risks. Some newer dishwashers boast internal heaters that let you keep your main heater at a lower setting.

8. Fire Up Your Fireplace

[Bring on the Heat](#) [Home Improvement Encyclopedia/Heating and Cooling](#)

Wood-burning fireplaces are actually net heat losers, but installing or retrofitting wood-burning inserts and stoves or going with high-efficiency natural gas fireplaces can give you added efficiency and redundancy in case your main heating system needs repair.

9. Help Your House Keep Its Cool

[Cool Roofing Material](#) [Solutions for Summer Heat](#)

White cement or metal roofs are top choices among roofing materials, as they keep a home cooler in summer. Other ways to beat summer heat include whole-house fans and attic fans as well as time-tested helpers like awnings and shade trees.

10. High-Tech Help for Your Car

Regular tune-ups, use of synthetic motor oils, and maintenance of proper tire pressure (cold weather contracts air) all save gasoline and make for a safer and more reliable vehicle. Gasoline-electric hybrid cars offer double the gas mileage of conventional vehicles, and tax incentives make buying them attractive. Carpooling and shopping or banking online are just a few other interactive ways to save gasoline.